

How we are permanently destroying Gaza

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How we are permanently destroying Gaza

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Michelle Pace and René Wildangel

Without radical policy change new violence will erupt in 2015 and Gaza will become unlivable. Meanwhile Israel is relieved of any responsibility as an occupying power under international law for the UN's Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism.



Palestinian boy outside his damaged house in Beit Hanoun. Ahmed Hjazzy/Demotix. All rights reserved.

At the time of writing and after recent visits to the Gaza Strip, this winter's rainfall is pushing Gazans once again into yet another grave [humanitarian crisis](#), while the risk of renewed violence remains high. The much promised reconstruction work has not even begun – almost four months since the agreed truce after this summer's devastating war and two months after a donor conference in Cairo promised [billions of aid dollars](#).

Most of the over 100,000 displaced people in Gaza whose houses were destroyed are still staying with their families, at UN schools or living in the remains of their damaged homes. The real consequences of the war are still not fully disclosed; a [recent UNRWA assessment](#) found that 96,000 refugee shelters were destroyed or damaged during the war, up from an initial estimate of 42,000. Only a few alternative housing options such as containers have been delivered. As the Israeli blockade of the Gaza strip remains largely in place, only a small part of the needed construction material is coming into the Gaza strip via Israel. The price of cement still stands at a record price, making reconstruction an impossible endeavor for most ordinary people in Gaza. Many of those who acquire cement or other construction materials sell them on the black market, as it is never quite enough to start rebuilding. And before rebuilding their homes, most residents would need to remove the millions of tons of rubble, which they cannot begin to do.

The widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure has increased the hardship on Gaza's population, who have had to cope with many restrictions in their daily lives for some years now. Electricity currently comes on for only around 6 hours a day. Gaza citizens have become habituated to life amidst the loud noise of generators and the ever-changing schedule of electricity shifts, which are announced on an

ad-hoc basis by the authorities. Most of Gaza's sewage goes untreated into the environment or the sea representing a dangerous health hazard. Gaza's livelihood is at stake and Gaza might become an unlivable place by 2020, as the [UN warned in a 2012 report](#). After 51 days of war during the summer, Gaza's overwhelmingly young population is widely traumatized. Although the energy and resilience of these young people is impressive, many young people who have lived through three wars in only six years have lost all hope for a fundamental change which would grant them an unheard of possibility: to lead a normal life.

Since the end of hostilities, international attention to the crisis has almost completely ceased. This is dangerous, as the situation is quickly deteriorating and beyond the current humanitarian crisis a new round of fighting could emerge. More violence and destruction would be much more than Gaza's population can bear.

Gaza's potential

For anyone visiting Gaza, the most depressing thing is the huge gap between the vast potential of Gaza's young population and the almost total isolation they face. Most of the young people in Gaza, who constitute more than 60% of the population, are now deeply traumatized, and many want to leave. Already hundreds have died attempting to flee their fate in Gaza via the sea. The authors interviewed many young people who are, despite the challenges, struggling to achieve the best education possible and are ready to use their talents and connect to the world. But they cannot leave the tiny Gaza strip and with constant electricity breaks, even working on computers remains a challenge.

Laila tells us of her experience of how Israel's blockade, "gradually started to take away some of our basic needs in Gaza, starting with electricity and ending up with the whole siege. At the beginning no one in Gaza thought that this situation would last more than a month, not to mention for 7 years... We have ended up focusing on basic needs rather than the political urgency of an independent and a free state. This Israeli policy is working really well and we are aware of it... We have indeed been put on a diet..." Mohammed, an aspiring young entrepreneur tells us how the imposed restrictions on Gazans have largely destroyed its economy and pushed the unemployment rate to over 42%. Many share their frustration about Gaza's complete isolation and, given the current depressing situation, their desire to leave the Gaza strip.

For many children the terrors of war dominate their entire lives. The one constant for the Al-Saudi family we visited in Shujaiyya has been rubble. 18 members of this extended family have been living in the rubble of their home destroyed during Israel's summer military campaign. It wasn't the first time that the family has been through this. For the last six years, the family has found itself trapped in a cycle of destruction and reconstruction; their home either a tangle of shattered concrete or about to become one. There are four young children in this family: Nouddine 11 years old with learning difficulties, 4 year old Minnah, 2 year old Rawand and little Odai who was born during this summer's war. These children, albeit used to the sound of warplanes, suffer from constant fear. Meanwhile the children of these families have to endure a school education system which is now composed of a three-shift system, as many UN schools still shelter refugees.

The prolonging of the Israeli blockade and the impediment of Gaza's reconstruction efforts could further destabilise the situation leading to chaos and the further social fragmentation of Gaza's already deeply damaged and traumatized society. Political radicalisation of youth will undoubtedly be a side effect if neither Fatah nor Hamas can offer solutions and services, and if international actors simply choose to stand by while Israel and Egypt continue to exert maximum pressure on the Gaza strip. While the declared goal to weaken the Hamas movement has never worked since their election victory of 2006, the harm collective punishment does to the civilian population is enormous.

This is one of the reasons why several Israeli politicians and representatives from the military forces have urged the Israeli government to untighten the blockade and create the glimpse of another future for the civilian population.

Reconstruction and the 'UN mechanism'

The UN monitoring system recently created to regulate the entry of construction materials into Gaza is not enough to bring about this change; not even enough to ease Gaza's pain. The mechanism is known as the *Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM)* and was brokered by the UN in September 2014 as a temporary agreement between the Government of Palestine (referring to the Palestinian unity government of 2014) and the Government of Israel. UNSCO published [a two-page fact sheet](#), but the full version of the GRM has yet to be published. What is most damning about this monitoring plan is that it relieves Israel of any responsibility as an occupying power under international law [and falls short of basic principles of development and good governance](#).

Residents of Gaza told the authors that given the complicated and intricate monitoring system with restrictive measures on the import and distribution of building materials, not to mention all the red tape involved, they expect little in terms of immediate aid to residents who have lost their homes and their livelihoods, especially in the most war-torn areas such as Beit Hanoun and Shujaiyya. According to Maher al-Tabba, a spokesman for the commercial chamber: "If the UN's monitoring plan is implemented, it would take 20 years for the Gaza Strip to be rebuilt." Most families have put up banners on the ruins of their homes with their mobile numbers and family details pleading for help by UN or other aid agencies, mostly in vain. Some 6,000 tons of cement a day are needed but the quantities approved – some dozen truckloads of cement, iron and gravel – are simply insufficient.

Egypt's catastrophic new anti-Gaza policy further complicates Gaza's situation. As part of Al-Sisi's strategy to tackle jihadist insurgents along the Sinai, a buffer zone on the Egyptian side of Rafah along the border with the Gaza Strip has been established. To this end, [over 800 buildings were destroyed and over 1000 families displaced](#). Furthermore, Egypt hinders Palestinians from travelling via Egypt and Palestinians are subjected to harsh and often racist treatment. Thousands were stuck for months as they were not able to return to their Gaza homes via Rafah. International protest regarding these grave Egyptian rights' violations against Sinai Bedouins and Palestinians was moderate and inadequate to change Egypt's stance.

The fact that Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas accepted these measures in a recent interview with the Egyptian "Al-Akhbar" newspaper, acknowledging Egypt's "security needs," was another blow to the internal reconciliation process. Meanwhile the "unity" government supported by Hamas and Fatah [does not function](#). Hamas is cornered in a cul de sac from which it cannot easily emerge, as former allies have reduced or stopped their support: Israel and Egypt compete on harsh policies against Hamas, while a roadmap for further progress in the reconciliation process does not exist.

The failure of the EU

During this summer's war the European Union drafted a non-paper addressing the unsolved question of monitoring the border crossings in order to guarantee a free flow of goods as well as Israel's security. Such a move was however rejected by the Israeli government. But real negotiations about a serious settlement of the Gaza crisis never took place; talks in Cairo were repeatedly postponed. While it became obvious that any settlement must include Hamas, so far neither the US nor Israel nor the EU are ready to acknowledge this as a reality. Without Hamas being part of the equation, lasting quiet is impossible. Right now, daily violations of the ceasefire are taking place. While Hamas' firing of rockets received immediate media coverage, the daily incidents of live Israeli army fire on Palestinian fishing boats approaching the 6 mile fishing zone limit and on civilians approaching the border area with Israel were merely reported, and certainly not addressed by the international community. The danger of a new war is imminent.

Meanwhile, a serious investigation of war crimes on the part of both parties during the conflict is prevented, although in a [recent report Amnesty International](#) claimed that Israel displayed "callous indifference" in attacks on family homes during its summer 2014 military campaign in Gaza and accuses Israel of war crimes. The Israeli government refuses to cooperate with the UN, as well as with

international, Israeli and Palestinian Human Rights organisations. It recently started to carry out its own investigations, whose [independence and impartiality are questionable](#) according to international and Israeli Human Rights organisations such as Bt'selem. The so-called "[Schabas Commission](#)", an investigation committee formed on behalf of UNHRC was prevented entry into Gaza. However, the important fieldwork on the ground in Gaza is almost exclusively carried out by Palestinian Human Rights organisations such as Al-Mizan and PCHR.

Under these dire circumstances, the European Union – which proclaims objectives of developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as the goal of preserving peace – has to adopt measures against continued Human Rights violations and make sure a credible investigation of the war is under way. It is hard to believe that the EU has not even discussed reimbursement for damages to EU and Member States' funded civilian infrastructure destroyed by Israeli military's actions in Gaza, which contradict international law. As with the GRM, Israel is left off the hook for its responsibilities as the Occupying Power under the Fourth Geneva Conventions – the very conventions that [Israel refuses to accept](#), while it maintains full air, land and sea control over the Gaza strip.

All EU member states should - as a matter of urgent priority and as advised by major Human Rights organizations such as [Amnesty International](#) - review their cooperation with Israeli military companies and declare a temporary arms embargo on both Israel and Palestinian militant factions.

That the EU Parliament has just "in principle" [recognized a Palestinian state](#), which has been the declared goal pursued by the international community and the EU over decades, is a positive step. Gaza, according to international law, is an integral part of this entity. The EU must continue its efforts vis a vis internal Palestinian reconciliation in order to renew the political legitimacy of a common political representation. Policymakers, NGOs, think tankers, academics and others, who care for the security of both Palestinians and Israelis, have the responsibility to end the inhumane and illegal blockade of Gaza and make sure the collective punishment on the young population of Gaza is replaced by a vision for a new future, before it is too late.